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Soviet's press releases sent out by N.Y. firm

ASSOCIATED PRESS

Soviet Embassy officials, normally secretive sorts, have paid a New York firm to distribute press releases written like news stories to newspapers and radio stations around the country.

So far this year, North American Precis Syndicate Inc. has shipped out three Soviet government-inspired releases to 3,800 newspapers and 5,000 radio stations.

Justice Department officials said there is nothing illegal about the practice so long as the syndicate files under the Foreign Agents Registration Act, which it has done.

The Soviet stories generally stress the strong bonds between the two countries and the need for more cooperation.

There's a glowing account of a July 1975 U.S.-Soviet space effort, Apollo-Soyuz, in which Soviet cosmonaut Alexei Leonov remembers Americans and Soviet astronauts meeting as friends.

Mr. Leonov is quoted as saying he joins others "who stand for international peaceful cooperation in space."

Then there's a story, with picture, about the close bonds and friendships formed by U.S. and Russian soldiers who met on the banks of the Elbe River in Germany in April 1945 at the end of World War II.

Ronald N. Levy, the syndicate's president, said the news releases are sent out accompanied by a separate piece of paper noting that the syndicate is paid by the embassy.

That procedure is required by the Justice Department, but agency spokesman Robert Sharp said there was no way to ensure adherence to that policy because the department doesn't check the cover letters.

It's unclear how many of the stories have found their way into print, but Soviet Embassy official Yuri Subbotin said he has been pleased with the results.

He said he was unable to provide the names of the papers using the Soviet material. Besides, he said, "The names

mean nothing to me. . . . They are not big, like the New York Times."

Mr. Subbotin said that when North American Precis Syndicate approached him about joining its business, he figured, "Yes, why not?"

Mr. Levy said the syndicate sends out regular packages of material to 3,800 newspapers, predominantly weeklies, and 5,000 radio stations.

Media outlets can use the material for free, with Levy promising between 100 and 400 clippings per release and 200 radio placements.

The syndicate's clients, including the Soviet, Canadian and South African embassies and the Caribbean and Romanian tourist organizations, pay between \$1,750 and \$2,950 for a newspaper release. A radio spot costs \$1,450.

The newspaper material, including features such as recipes, travel advice and household tips, is ready to be inserted into the paper without editing changes. Radio spots are written so they can be read on the air.

"It's a nice package — very slick," said Eddie Dodd, editor of the 2,000-circulation Abbeville Herald in Abbeville, Ala. Nonetheless, Mr. Dodd said, "I generally just throw it away."

Mr. Dodd said he didn't remember any Soviet material, but he "wouldn't be exactly happy" if the stories were not clearly marked.

Although he is paid for his services, Mr. Levy defends his business as in the public's best interest.

"One reason I distribute their information for them — and gladly — is that I think it pays for us to listen to what they have to say and to see them as human beings," he said in a letter.

"Not listening to them could be like not looking at the bathroom scale or not listening to a doctor who tells you you have high blood pressure," Mr. Levy said.

"Sometimes it can be better to look and listen and deal with a situation than ignore it."